

**Charlton Oral History Research Grant 2015-2016, Baylor Institute for Oral History  
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*Polluted Purifiers: An Oral History of Southeast Louisiana's Oyster Farmers in the Wake of the Deepwater  
Horizon Environmental Disaster*

Final Report

The oral history project *Polluted Purifiers: An Oral History of Southeast Louisiana's Oyster Farmers in the Wake of the Deepwater Horizon Environmental Disaster* documents the effects of the BP Oil Spill on oyster farmers and fishermen in Louisiana. The eighteen oral histories in this project offer an understanding of how the oyster industry, and the commercial fisheries in general, is faring in light of incredibly trying conditions. The oyster industry was finally showing signs of recovery from 2005's Hurricane Katrina when the oil spill happened in 2010. These interviews take place in 2015, five years after the spill, when the oyster industry was in a precarious position. Though Louisiana's oyster farmers are famously resilient in spite ever-changing Gulf conditions, collectively, the interviews in this project capture a moment of uncertainty.

This final report covers 1) the project's background 2) the project's focus 3) the narrators 4) findings and themes that emerged in the narratives and 4) future projects that I hope to develop out of this new archive of material.

### **Background**

On April 22, 2010, an explosion on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig left eleven oil rig workers dead and a breached deep-sea well hemorrhaging oil into the Gulf of Mexico. For nearly three months, British Petroleum (BP) supervised efforts to plug the well as an estimated 4.9 million barrels of oil<sup>1</sup> spilled into the Gulf of Mexico. Under BP's leadership, as a part of the clean-up process, almost two million gallons of the controversial chemical, corexit, were used to disperse the oil<sup>2</sup>. The use of dispersant on this scale is historically unprecedented, and the decision to use the chemical dispersant was widely criticized by environmentalists. The Deepwater Horizon Environmental Disaster, also known as the BP Oil Spill, was the largest oil spill in U.S. History.

### **Project's Focus**

The oral history project chronicles oyster farmers' experiences during and in the years following the environmental disaster, in addition to their histories growing up on the Gulf. The interviews cover not only how oysters were affected, but also how the largest environmental disaster in US history was handled and its impact on coastal communities whose livelihood depend on Gulf aquaculture and tourism. Many oystermen worked for BP as a part of the Vessels of Opportunity program and had insiders' perspectives on the clean-up process. Some oystermen have been compensated for their losses through the BP Claims Facilities, while others have not. The project sheds light on coastal communities' historical relationship with the oil industry and explores broader, complex

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<sup>1</sup> *On Scene Coordinator Report: Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Homeland Security, U.S. Coast Guard, 2011. U.S. Dept of Homeland Security, Sept. 2011. Web. 16 Mar. 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Miller, Michael E. "Study Suggests Chemical Used in BP Oil Spill Cleanup Capable of Injuring People and Wildlife." *The Washington Post*. WP Company, 07 Apr. 2015. Web. 17 Mar. 2017.

issues, such as the intersection of race, class, and development in the respective parishes as it relates to the narrators' personal experiences during the spill and claims process.

### **The Narrators**

The project began as a comparative study of three oyster-producing regions of Louisiana, with the aim of measuring how the oyster-producing parishes were uniquely impacted by the oil spill in 2010. However, as the project was under way, and this interviewer's understanding of the fisheries of Louisiana deepened, the range of narrators grew to include oyster distributors, an oyster biologist, a journalist who covers the fisheries, a community organizer in New Orleans East, and a charter boat captain-turned coastal restoration activist.

### **Primary Themes**

An oral history project—and the plurality of voices it encompasses—inevitably resists summary. Personal accounts, even within a population that shares a profession, vary widely and are sometimes contradictory. That said, below are some of the primary themes and findings that emerged in the narrators' interviews. I've included some context for these findings when I felt context was helpful, and I've included some pertinent, illustrative quotations.

### **Canaries of the Estuaries**

Oysters are uniquely suited to mirror the health of Gulf ecosystems. They are a keystone species, which means they are critical to the health of the ecosystem of which they are a part. Oysters provide a service to the Gulf by filtering pollutants—from human sewage to industrial farm runoff—from the water. In doing so, oysters concentrate pollutants in their bodies.

“Oysters are the fundamental basis of the estuarine food web,” said oyster biologist John Supan in our interview. “They're filter feeders, they clean the water; they build reefs and habitat for other organisms...They're bio-concentrators. They concentrate what they feed on. So even though the surrounding waters might be lightly polluted, the interior of those oysters might be heavily polluted because they're filtering eight liters an hour and concentrating all that in their bodies.”

For this reason, Dr. Supan calls oysters “the canaries of the estuary”:

“[Miners] used canaries—you used caged canaries in a coal mine because methane was odorless, and the birds would die before it became—the birds would die indicating that the air in the mine was becoming hazardous. And so that's where ‘canaries in the coal mine’ comes from, and so [oysters are] considered canaries of the estuaries because they are filter feeders, and they're going to accumulate toxins rapidly because they're filter feeders. So the health of our oyster habitat, or your oyster reefs and your oyster resources in an estuary is a very good indication on the health of the estuary, because they filter so much water.”

### **Oil Spills and the Fisheries**

The state of Louisiana owes much of its economy to the oil and gas industry. The oil industry and the fisheries have co-existed along Louisiana's coast since offshore drilling began in the early twentieth century. In the coastal communities where the narrators live, many families straddle the fisheries/oil industry divide. Not only do oyster farmers share the waters with oil industry employees, they share dinner tables. Many of the oyster farmers I spoke with were well-acquainted with oil spills.

While the farmers acknowledged the state's dependence on the oil industry, many vehemently believe the oil industry needs to be better regulated. They feel the state government is unfairly biased to prioritize the oil industry's interests over the health of the fisheries and the environment. Aside from the BP Oil Spill, oystermen routinely take oil companies to court for damaging oyster reefs—whether from illegally dumping chemicals on their oyster leases or driving tugboats through fragile reefs. Peter Vujnovich describes this in his oral history.

“We’ve had oil spills,” said Byron Encalade, a lifelong oysterman from East Pointe à la Hache, Louisiana and President of the Louisiana Oystermen Association. “We never thought [the spill] was going to be that bad. No, we never did, because oil spills we’ve had.”

### **Oyster Mortalities**

Oystermen reported oyster mortalities across the state, but the spill has affected oystermen in each parish differently, depending on how much oil and dispersant contaminated the waters of their oyster leases. The most devastating oyster mortality occurred east of the Mississippi River in the Lake Pontchartrain Basin. In the Lake Pontchartrain Basin, the oyster catch in 2013 was seventy percent lower than pre-spill averages<sup>3</sup>, and though the 2014-2015 statistics show some promising improvement in oyster production, this area remains drastically below pre-spill averages. The losses in the Lake Pontchartrain Basin are particularly dire because this is where the state's public seed grounds are, where oyster fishermen harvest juvenile oysters to “plant” on their private leases.

During the oil spill, in an attempt to push back the encroaching oil, Louisiana opened freshwater diversions from the Mississippi River in the Lake Pontchartrain Basin. The state claimed the force of the Mississippi freshwater would deter oil from entering the estuary, though some narrators mistrusted the state's rationale. The state's reasoning aside, the diversion had other, marked effects on the Lake Pontchartrain Basin. The Mississippi freshwater lowers the salinity of the brackish estuary where the oysters thrive, and maintaining a specific salinity range is crucial to oyster growth and survival. Freshwater diversions also cover reefs with sediment and introduce pollutants to the estuary. Some claim the oyster mortality in this area is partly due to the freshwater diversions. Others maintain the freshwater diversions do not explain the oyster mortalities, or the fact that new generations of oysters have failed to settle on the reefs in the Lake Pontchartrain Basin. Many to continue blame the mortalities on oil and chemical dispersant contamination.

In 2015, Byron Encalade, whose leases are in the Lake Pontchartrain Basin said, “It’s unreal. I’ve got two oyster boats, and I’ve got to buy oysters. Two oyster boats, three hundred and some acres of beds, oyster beds, and I don’t have no oyster... I haven’t had one since that oil spill, literally.”

Vlaho Mjehovich, an oyster farmer based in Plaquemines Parish:

“[I catch] maybe 5 percent of what I used to catch—not even 5 percent of what I caught in 2009, and it’s recorded on my trip tickets to a lot of fisheries....Areas 6, 7, and 5 have been wiped out. That area has not come back. In ’09—that was one of the most productive areas.”

Nick Collins, an oyster farmer based in Lafourche Parish:

TAKACS: How far below is [oyster] production from normal?

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<sup>3</sup> Alexander-Bloch, Benjamin. "BP Oil Spill: In Hard-hit Oyster Areas, Concrete Mountains Rise 5 Years after Disaster." *The Times-Picayune*. NOLA.com, 20 Apr. 2015. Web. 27 Apr. 2015. <[http://www.nola.com/environment/index.ssf/2015/04/bp\\_oil\\_spill\\_oyster\\_5\\_years\\_co.html](http://www.nola.com/environment/index.ssf/2015/04/bp_oil_spill_oyster_5_years_co.html)>.

N. COLLINS: It's horrible, I mean, I would, say, go from eighty to a hundred sacks [of oysters per day] to... now, fifteen or twenty.

TAKACS: And has it changed much, say, from 2012 to 2013 and 2014?

N. COLLINS: A little decline every year—worse.

The 2015 data from Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries indicates that the state's stock of oysters—the number of oysters available for harvest across the state—are 72.5 percent below the long-term average<sup>4</sup>.

### **Overfishing After the Spill**

Oyster farmers lease private plots of water bottom from the state of Louisiana. They transplant “seed” or juvenile oysters from the public oyster grounds to private leases. In one to three years, juvenile oysters grow to market size, and farmers are then able to harvest the adult oysters for sale. Because farmers raise and harvest oysters on private leases, they are distinguished from oyster fishermen, who do not raise their own oyster crops and who primarily harvest oysters from public oyster grounds. However, both farmers and oyster fishermen rely on the public oyster grounds. If a farmer's private leases aren't producing at that time, he will fish for oysters on the public oyster reefs.

Since the spill, because of the statewide oyster mortalities, more oyster farmers have had to fish for oysters than ever before, and the public oyster grounds are being overfished.

Nick Collins, an oyster farmer based in Lafourche Parish:

“The little bit [of oysters] we have growing wild gets overfished yearly since the oil spill. We never depended so much upon our private leases for, say, year-round fishing. You always had a little bit of help from the state public grounds and that eased them off—say you had to fish on them four to six months, you know, six months, they got to grow and be all right because you were fishing the planted stuff from the state grounds. Now, since the oil spill, we've been strictly fishing our private grounds, and it's just become—last year, we made it through—right now it's very hard to make the orders.”

Vlaho Mjehovich, an oyster farmer based in Plaquemines Parish:

“The problem now is anywhere they have oysters you've got a fleet. It's like a—they come get it. It's not going to last. That's the problem, too, the state has to address. The industry—right now, oyster prices are so high, some of [the buyers] can't wait...for us to produce oysters on the wild reef, so they have a competition going with the boats and get the price back down where it was. I mean, pre the spill, a sack of oysters might have been \$21 to \$25 off the wild reef. Right now, you're looking anywhere from \$50 to \$60.”

Some narrators reported that steep competition for oysters has led to more circumstances of poaching—when fishermen illegally harvest oysters from private leases.

### **Sharecropping**

Sharecropping, the practice of harvesting oysters from another farmer's lease for a portion of the profits, is on the rise after the spill. Many farmers whose leases were damaged during the spill have

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<sup>4</sup> Masson, Todd. "Louisiana Oyster Harvest Up, but Stocks Are Way down." *NOLA.com*. NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune, 02 Sept. 2016. Web. 18 Mar. 2017.

no choice but to harvest oysters for farmers who have viable oyster reefs. While sharecropping was a common practice before the spill, it is more prevalent due the state's marked oyster scarcity.

### **Adaptation and Disproportionate Effects of the Spill**

Oyster farmers—who hold private leases and cultivate their own oyster reef—have fared much better than oyster fishermen because fishermen relied primarily on the public oyster grounds. As mentioned earlier, the public oyster grounds east of the Mississippi were devastated during the spill.

Oyster farmers are accustomed to dealing with fluctuating Gulf conditions, whether conditions change from hurricanes, heavy rainfall, or pollution from the Mississippi. Oyster farmers often lease oyster reefs in multiple areas. This way, if one oyster lease is damaged or not producing, a farmer still has oyster product elsewhere to sustain him. Leasing reefs in multiple areas is like a form of insurance amidst water conditions that can change suddenly from season to season.

However, this isn't a luxury afforded to oyster farmers with fewer leases, who feel the blow of an oyster lease out-of-commission more acutely. Oyster farmers with less acreage of reef suffered the most as a result of the spill. For the African American community of oyster farmers of Pointe à la Hache, the effects were devastating. Not only did farmers of this area rely on the public oyster grounds, many hold oyster leases in the now-diminished Lake Pontchartrain Basin.

Mr. Encalade discussed this in our interview extensively. Mr. Encalade called Pointe à la Hache “a ghost town” since the spill.

### **Losing the Younger and the Older Generations**

*Times-Picayune* journalist Benjamin Alexander-Bloch said that for many oystermen, the oil spill and Hurricane Katrina were a “one-two punch.” Just two of the oystermen I interviewed had children in the oyster industry. Some of the oystermen claimed that they wouldn't want their children to join the industry because the future is too uncertain, even bleak. In addition, some of the elder oystermen used their BP settlement money to help them retire, which is perhaps an indication of the oystermen's outlook on recovery.

Mr. Encalade: “We have a lot of young kids that came of age, and those that could get out have gone. And those who got hurt the most is that those oyster fishermen that are in their forties and fifties can't go anywhere else—and sixties, and even into their seventies, because you didn't retire like some jobs. You fished well into your seventies. I had people in their eighties who were out their fishing oysters, still fishing. So you didn't retire. You may have slowed down a little bit, but you fished until you couldn't fish no more. And that was the way that happened. That's the way it was. So now you've got these guys that are forty, fifty, sixty, and seventy years old now. There's no relief for them. And BP is still playing games.”

### **BP's Use of Chemical Dispersants**

Under BP's leadership, as a part of the clean-up process, almost two million gallons of the controversial chemical corexit were sprayed to disperse the oil<sup>5</sup>. The dispersant, banned in the UK, was staunchly opposed by environmentalists at the time of the spill, and recent studies have corroborated environmentalists' concerns. A 2012 study in *Environmental Pollution* found that the oil

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<sup>5</sup> Miller, Michael E. "Study Suggests Chemical Used in BP Oil Spill Cleanup Capable of Injuring People and Wildlife." *The Washington Post*. WP Company, 07 Apr. 2015. Web. 17 Mar. 2017.

and the dispersant combined, the compound was 52 times more toxic to marine life than oil itself<sup>6</sup>. A 2015 study in *PLOS ONE* found that “the dispersant can seriously damage epithelial cells, such as those in the lungs of humans or the gills of marine animals”<sup>7</sup>.

Because the dispersant breaks down the oil, the oil is readily absorbable to marine life. Dr. Supan noted, “I can’t think of a better delivery system of delivering hydrocarbons into the food web than what they did. So because the oil droplet got broke down into this microscopic particle that can be assimilated by nature, either through the bacterial world or through menhaden, swimming around with their mouths open.”

Thousands of coastal residents and clean-up workers fell ill during the spill, reporting respiratory problems, nausea, headaches, and skin eruptions<sup>8</sup>. The long-term effects of exposure to oil and the dispersant are still unknown. A ten-year National Institutes of Health (NIH) study is underway to monitor the health impacts on clean-up workers and volunteers<sup>9</sup>.

Jules Melancon could smell the dispersant inside his home on Grand Isle:

“They were spraying chemical offshore. It was supposed to be ten miles, but I think they were closer than that—when the oil started getting closer. Inside my home, like, right here inside this enclosed home, we could smell chemical at night. We’d wake up in the middle of the night and we had our eyes burning—chemical in our home...It was something like kerosene or, you know, some kind of—it was a hard smell.”

“What rights do they have to shoot out chemicals out there that we didn’t know anything about?” said Vlaho Mjehovich, an oyster farmer based in Plaquemines Parish. “[BP] wanted to sink [the oil]. Out of sight, out of mind, in their opinion—their attack was. And the government should have done something, and the Coast Guard was along with them [...] BP had money to do what they wanted to do, basically...Down the lines, what’s going to happen? We still don’t know. They [...] shouldn’t have done it. They shouldn’t have allowed them to do it.”

Many felt the use of dispersants was not only dangerous, but criminal. Because the dispersant breaks down the oil, the oil does not stay on the water’s surface. Some narrators felt BP used the dispersant as a means of making the oil less visible to the public, therefore reducing BP’s accountability for the oil.

Theresa Dardar remarked, “They used that dispersant so the world wouldn’t know how much oil was really out there.”

## **BP Claims Process**

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<sup>6</sup> Rico-Martínez, Roberto, Terry W. Snell, and Tonya L. Shearer. "Synergistic Toxicity of Macondo Crude Oil and Dispersant Corexit 9500A(®) to the Brachionus Plicatilis Species Complex (Rotifera)." *Environmental pollution*, vol. 173, 2013, pp. 5-10, doi:10.1016/j.envpol.2012.09.024.

<sup>7</sup> Miller, Michael E. "Study Suggests Chemical Used in BP Oil Spill Cleanup Capable of Injuring People and Wildlife." *The Washington Post*. WP Company, 07 Apr. 2015. Web. 17 Mar. 2017.

<sup>8</sup> McGill, Kevin. "BP Oil Spill Cleanup Workers Reach Settlement Over Medical Problems Caused By Spill." *Business Insider*. Business Insider, 11 Apr. 2014. Web. 18 Mar. 2017.

<sup>9</sup> "The GuLF Study." *National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences*. National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, Nov. 2016. Web. 18 Mar. 2017.

Most of the narrators received some kind of financial settlement through the BP Claims Process, and many hired lawyers to handle their suits against BP. In 2015, some of the narrators were still waiting to be compensated from BP. Many believed the claims process was purposefully arduous, to deter residents from making claims. The majority of narrators I spoke with felt they were not fairly compensated by the BP Settlement Program. In fact, many felt swindled. Chief among narrators' concerns was the fact that they settled for money that would not match the long-term effects of the spill.

Many oyster farmers and fishermen had to take smaller, initial settlements from BP because they couldn't afford to wait for a potentially larger settlement. They needed the immediate assistance. As a result, they were undercompensated for losses that were larger than they initially imagined. Donald Dardar, a shrimper and oyster farmer in Terrebonne Parish, said the settlements amounted to "signing your rights away" as a settlement prohibits one from bringing future charges against BP.

Jules Melancon, an oyster farmer based in Grand Isle, Louisiana:

"Then, at five months later [after the spill], all of a sudden BP says the cleanup's over. To me it was just starting. They said, 'No further need for cleanup.' They laid everybody off. To me it was all propaganda and all. They laid us off. Then after that, we didn't have nothing. We didn't have no oysters. We didn't have nothing; everything was dead. Then they had that guy Ken Feinberg that came in here with that settlement thing—it was a joke. They wanted to give us a little bit of money and just enough to buy food. You couldn't pay your bills, you know, starving us to death."

### **Vessels of Opportunity Program**

BP established the Vessels of Opportunity program to hire out-of-work fishermen to clean up the oil spill. Some of the narrators I spoke with participated in the program, and while some mentioned that they appreciated having some income after the state closed waters to fishing, many felt the program was a publicity stunt on BP's part in order to save face in the national news. They felt the clean-up work itself was disorganized and ineffective. Many felt the hiring process was unfair, that nepotism quickly became a part of the hiring process.

Many worried about the health effects from working in the program and the increased exposure to toxic chemicals. Some were so worried that they were hesitant to sign up, but ultimately felt they had no choice because they needed some income. Workers were not provided with proper safety equipment when they were exposed to toxic environments. The narrators never received respirators when they were inhaling noxious fumes. Some never received hazmat suits. A couple narrators reported that their boats were damaged when working for the program but that they were not compensated for the damages.

Nick Collins of Lafourche Parish:

"It was a joke, though. It really was. I mean, how much did they accumulate, oil, for that whole Vessels of Opportunity work across the coast? I mean, they might have picked up—they say three percent. I think it's way less than that because we hardly ever did anything."

### **Coastal Erosion and Wetland Loss**

Louisiana loses about a football field of wetlands to the Gulf of Mexico every hour<sup>10</sup>. Coastal erosion and wetland loss have been underway since the early twentieth century, but erosion has greatly accelerated in recent years. Coastal erosion, according to Dr. Supan, has a few causes: channelization of the marshes by oil companies, the leveeing of the Mississippi River in 1927, land subsidence, and wave action that tears up the marsh grass holding the soil in place. The oil industry claims responsibility for a third of the wetland loss in the state, but some narrators felt the oil industry's responsibility was greater than the admitted 35 percent.

Almost all of the narrators remarked on the sorrow of watching the wetlands disappear. John Tesvich, Chairman of the Louisiana Oyster Taskforce and resident of Plaquemines Parish, said the wetland loss was like watching the years "erase our past and history": "And that's just something that we have to deal with here. Whether it's the places where we grew up and the communities that we used to have—it's just not the same now as it was back then."

Peter Vujnovich, an oyster farmer based in Plaquemines Parish, said that watching the wetlands disappear was like watching eighty-five percent of a mountain disappear over a twenty-five-year period.

Coastal erosion, which was already occurring at an alarming rate in Louisiana, has worsened since the spill. When oil made its way into the wetlands, the oil contamination killed marsh grasses. Marsh grass roots hold the spongy marsh soil in place. With the grass dead, the roots rotted, and the marshland swiftly washed away.

### **Coastal Restoration and the Louisiana Master Plan**

At the time of these interviews, Louisiana's plans for coastal restoration were chief among the thoughts of oystermen. The Louisiana Master Plan, designed by the Coastal Protection and Restoration Association (CPRA), is the state's effort to combat the wetland loss. Among the plan's initiatives include large freshwater diversions from the Mississippi. As mentioned earlier, freshwater diversions can decimate oyster populations because they lower the salinity of the estuary. They can also cover the reefs with sediment, suffocating them.

The freshwater diversions will displace commercially important species, and in turn, it will displace the fishermen that depend on them. As is, the plan accelerates land loss in some areas. Communities will be displaced, and many narrators are dissatisfied, to put it mildly, that there doesn't seem to be provisions in the plan to consider their needs or to compensate them.

In our interview, the Theresa Dardar describes attending a public informational meeting about the Louisiana Master Plan, where the speaker informed her that—under the plan's current configuration—her home, and their community, would be underwater within fifty years. She said, "I believe that whenever they do their planning—whenever they have a public meeting, they already know what they are going to do. They've already decided what they're going to do. So even though you go up there and fuss and say you should do this and that, I don't think it matters."

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<sup>10</sup> Sutter, John D. "Each Hour, a Football Field of Land Vanishes." *CNN*. Cable News Network, 8 Apr. 2016. Web. 18 Mar. 2017.



Some felt that to criticize the master plan was to be labelled as anti-coastal restoration—an unfair label since oystermen disagreed with the current plan for restoration, not restoration itself. All of the narrators discussed the sorrow of watching the wetlands disappear.

Dr. Supan remarked, “If the state is adopting and implementing a master plan for coastal restoration that’s going to displace the fishery, they should thoroughly—and the state should really understand that they’re not just displacing the fish; they’re displacing fishermen too.

And part of that master plan—there should be a plan on how to help those people adapt to that displacement, and there is none in the master plan. Basically, the master plan says, “This is what we’re going to do; this is the reason why we have to do it. It’s for the benefit of all, and everyone who’s displaced by that, you’re on your own.” And if you say anything negative about it in the press or in the public, they attack you as being anti-coastal restoration, and it is totally unfair.”

### **Outlook**

When asked about an outlook for the Gulf and the fisheries, most of the narrators expressed their misgivings about the future. Some remain hopeful that the Gulf of Mexico will recover from the spill. Others were less optimistic because of—in addition to the spill’s effects—the obstacles presented by wetland loss, the influx of foreign imports, and the Louisiana Master Plan. Even among those farmers who felt prepared to adapt to the changing fisheries, some remarked they weren’t sure they wanted to be a part of it. Only two of the oyster farmers I interviewed have sons in the industry.

Dr. Supan noted that the natural oil seeps in the Gulf and the already-present oil-eating biota in the Gulf of Mexico are cause for hope. The Gulf of Mexico is better equipped to handle an oil spill than the Prince Edward Sound, the site of the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill.

Nick Collins, an oyster farmer based in Lafourche Parish:

“My outlook is grim. You know, with the decline of production of crab—blue crab, oysters, shrimp, fish—I don’t see it. If something don’t change, I don’t see it much being here in twenty years on the fisheries’ side.”

### **The Joys of Oyster Farming**

Nearly every oysterman I spoke with expressed some gratitude for a life spent on the water, despite its challenges. Some remarked that theirs was the best profession they could imagine. When asked about the joys of being an oyster farmer, many expressed pride in raising their own oyster crops. There was pride in being one’s own boss. Some described the beauty of the sunrises they’ve watched from their boats.

Mitch Jurisich, an oyster farmer based in Plaquemines Parish:

“We take a lot of things for granted, but when you sit back and you really look, there’s no better place to be. Even a bad day at the office is good because you’ve got to turn some of the negatives, and you start thinking about it, You know what? Nobody can see that horizon I’m looking at today. It’s just gorgeous. Some days it’s nasty, some days it’s ugly. But it’s still a pretty ugly. So that’s one of the other advantages that come. When you get out in an environment and you become part of that environment, you feel like you belong. And that’s what I think the main thing is. I feel like that’s where I belong—we belong. And my roots—that’s where my roots are.”

**Future Projects**

I intend to prepare a paper based on these oral history narratives for presentation at the 2018 meeting of the Oral History Association in Montreal, Canada. I'm currently at work on a novel about the BP Oil Spill, which will explore themes that emerged in this the oral history project.

**Thank you**

In closing, I would like to thank Dr. Stephen Sloan, Mr. Steven Sielaff, and all of the staff and student assistants at the Institute for Oral History at Baylor University for making this project possible. I've benefited greatly from the training and equipment you provided, your feedback on my project, and all your efforts during the transcription process. It has been a true pleasure working with you, and I hope to have the opportunity to work with you all again.

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